



Jack & Grace Fujimoto



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When you listen to Jack and Grace Fujimoto talk, you can't help but know you're in the presence of an incredibly rare couple. Having been married now for over sixty years, as teenagers they were a part of the rebuilding of Sawtelle's Japantown (the Japantown of West Los Angeles), meeting by chance when Jack was pumping gas and Grace needed to refuel. Grace's family owned the Sawtelle Fish Market, while Jack worked five jobs to pay his way through college at UCLA. They flitter in and out of speaking Japanese – an even rarer thing to hear today – and still keep active in community events. Their affection and care for each other is palpable, as Jack dedicated [the historical pictorial book](#) he wrote on Sawtelle Japantown to Grace and her family.



Grace and Jack Fujimoto at their home in Century City.

But when it comes to Jack himself, you would be unable to glean his array of contributions to the Japanese American community just by talking to him: Not only was he the first Asian American to become President of a higher education institution on the U.S. mainland (Sacramento City College) his academic, cultural, and language preservation work earned him Japan's Order of the Rising Sun award in 2011. But all of that is completely left out during our conversation. Instead we talk about each of their families, and reflect on the legacy of the dispersed Japanese American community today and where it's going in the future. Jack also can't help but remind and gently tease Grace about their courtship. In short, they are a wealth of knowledge and wonderfully down-to-earth.

[To Jack] So I know you're very involved in the Nikkei community here. So how have you seen it sort of transform or change, even from post-war until now? Like taking Sawtelle, for example, as a Japanese American hub.

It's pretty much disappeared, the JA hub. Two years ago the LA city council recognized Sawtelle Japantown but it's sort of the tail-end. Sawtelle in the 20s and 30s, it was sort of a ghetto. Westwood was here, Bel-Air was there, Brentwood is over there, Pacific Palisades, and they says, 'OK Jap, come and take care of my grass, take care of my landscape, but you live over here.' Redlined and all that. And then after the war they became much more entrepreneurial because the Nisei came out before World War Two. It was the Nisei that said, "Arigato." Kibei and Nisei and that was the thing to do. Go to Japan and get educated. Start a business or work for a business or whatever. But you come back and what do you do? Gardening, market, things like that. But you're always subservient to your Issei dad.

So then WWII comes along and after the war, the Issei, many of them had desires to go back to Japan, make their gold mountain here and then go back to Japan to live. And be sort of like the kingpin in the village saying, 'Yeah, I went to America I made a lot of money.' Even though they didn't make anything. That was my grandfather. He went back to Japan from here and he took his family, two boys and two girls. Anyway took them back and he didn't have any money and yet, he poured out money to different people in the small village as if he was a kingpin.

What was his job here? What was he doing?

I don't know. He had a laundry. He made geta [footwear]. Because I remember my uncle lit fire to the laundry. He was a little old brat you know. Make chaos all over the community and so he'd take a fire and burn somebody's shirt and grandpa or grandma would have to run over and apologize. He was good at making geta because he didn't have any shoes. In other words, they survived the best way they could. A lot of it was just farming.

What prefecture were they from?

Hiroshima. Yes so he went back to Japan. Acting like a big old kingpin. He had some kind of disease. But he was an alcoholic, too. He liked to drink. So he didn't last very long. And Grandma, when I went in 1950 I right after the Korean War started, I talked to my grandma. I talked to her for a long time. Delightful lady. She brought up the kids. Shipped them back here in 1924, that time period when the anti-Japanese legislation came on. So they returned here and stayed with the Yokoyama family and the old man got mad and said, "I can't support all these women here. The two sisters. 'So, you go get married. You go get married.' So that's how my dad got married to one. And then the other daughter to another family.

So it was the desire of all the people or most of the people to go back to Japan with gold mountain. And, when you think about it, what the hell are they're going to go back to? What are they going to be doing? They're still young yet, they've got a whole life ahead of them, then they got a war coming on or whatever. But in the '70s, Japan was ruling the world economically so it was great. But right after '45 people got out of camp but there was nothing. They had to build. And it was the Nisei that built. And the JACL was all Nisei, they wouldn't accept an Issei. So there was a lot of resentment against the JACL. Because no Issei could do anything with JACL.

I didn't know that. So they purposely kept the Issei out?

The Nisei kept the Issei out. That's why like, the Manzanar riot, the Kibei guys ganged up on the JACL people, they were all Nisei. Same thing in the Poston riot. These riots were all prompted against the JACL because they were Nisei. But see before the war it was always the Nisei subservient to the Issei. That's to me anyway, that's my interpretation. Then the next thing is right after camp, the people came out and the Issei couldn't speak English. So how are they going to go and live? They have to go to a boarding house. How did they negotiate in the boarding house? Or how are they going to go and buy something? Then the Nisei then had to come out of their shell and say, 'Okay, Dad. Get lost, I'll take care of it.'

And that's why Sawtelle really was a boomtown. Sawtelle was really important in the late '40s and '50s. Then come about '65 when the big wave of shin-Issei, new Issei coming in because they were getting the prelude to '70 boons for the Japanese.

So for me, the '50s and '60s were great times because I got into academics and my dad said, 'You're no farmer. You ain't going to succeed in farming. So you better use your head. I won't give you any money I don't have any.' Because when they came out of camp they had nothing. So then I went into academics.



Jack Fujimoto

So you yourself, your family was where? Were you in the L.A. area?

No I'm San Diego, Northern San Diego. My dad and his brother both were strawberry farmers. So then we went into camp with three cousins.

And you have a family of six, you were the oldest?

Yeah.

We're sort of like two families because me, my older sister and second sister, we were all born in the '20s and '30s. And the three others, Tak came along in '39, Judy in '40 and Eiko in '45. We're like two families. We really don't know each other that well. That's why when Tak became this famous cinematographer and all that, we didn't talk.

Not super close with the younger siblings.

No. My dad sort of took a little different turn when he was raising us. He wanted me to go to Japan. Become a Kibei. Go get educated, come back here, do whatever you want. But with Tak, young kid. Two or three years old when he went to camp. My father wanted to be the block manager, he became the block manager. He lost all interest in going back to Japan. He

flipped around and became much more American. And so the three younger kids, they grew up American. They don't know Japan at all. They don't know kanji, they don't know hiragana or any of the language. And they can listen. My dad and mom can't speak English but at least they can understand.

So that happened in camp?

Before camp because when Tak went into camp, Judy went into camp, my mom just about died in camp that first year because it was so damn hot. And I remember I used to have to go to the canteen every day. And they kept saying, 'Hey get your ass out of here. We're ain't going to give you anymore ice.' But everybody suffered if they weren't used to the heat. So mom just about perished, died.

So if your Dad made this switch in his raising of you, was that because he knew the war was happening and he thought, 'We'd better really assimilate or better assimilate these younger children?' Or what do you think that was.

Well in my case, seeing he already wanted me to go to Japan. I was already 12 years old, 1940. He wanted me to go to Japan and get an education. Me and my cousin. It's a good thing we didn't go.

Yeah. You would've been stuck.

We would've been stuck, right. I would've been conscripted for the Army, then we'd be suffering and all that. So it's a good decision saying that, 'We don't have any money to send you.'

But he wanted that initially.

Yeah, that's what he wanted. So his views were pro-Japan.

During the war too or throughout?

Just sort of at the beginning of the war when Japan was winning. Then, it changed. And he became the block manager. He'd start talking for the

community of the block. You know there are 16 barracks in a block and he became a spokesperson for that. And then he started building ponds and bridges you know to beautify the block? And then my uncle, my father's older brother was very craft-oriented so he'd take mesquite and make bird pins, make different kinds of crafts. And he'd build bridges, go fishing. So they became much more Americanized. In other words the whole view of pro-Japan changed to not anti-Japan but pro-American.

It was like a sense of self-preservation too. But it's sad because it took away the identity of the Issei or the Kibei that felt like they didn't have a say anymore.

That's right. That's why in camp, they make a big noise about those that went to the army, 442, 100th and glorify them. And then there were people that said, 'Well, I don't understand anything about worship of the Emperor. Loyalty to the Emperor. And so you have that Frank Emi, and no-no resistance group, and Tule Lake became a segregation camp. So you know you get the divide among the Japanese. It's an interesting period of Japanese American history. That's why what you're doing is very exciting, I think.

It is because now that so much time has passed I think even. The people I speak with are getting more honest about how or they're taking guesses with how their parents might have felt. I think as people get older they realize you know, 'I want to say this truth about my past.'

Yeah. [Jack to Grace] What do you think?

Grace: Being the baby of the family I had way too much fun.

Jack: You have opinions.

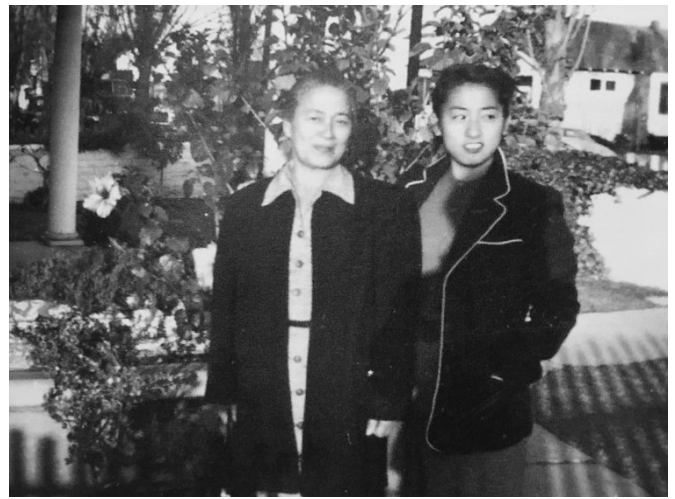
Grace: Well my father was probably the hardest person to understand. He's very strong minded and my mother was very gentle and she took everything.

Jack: Your Mom was tremendous.

Grace: I know. She's a smart lady, man.

Jack: Your old man was a grouch.

Grace: [laughs] I'd always hear him say, "Bakayaro!" Means 'He's stupid.' Always kept saying that I thought, 'Oh no there he goes again.' He's a mean old dad.



Grace's mother (Aki Toya) and Grace.

Was he Issei, Kibei?

Grace: Issei.

And your mother too?

Grace: Yeah. But I was the youngest so I got to be spoiled rotten. I had it made. It was hot in there [Poston] but I had a ball in there. I mean I got dark, well, I got darker and my sister is very fair, she's a beauty queen. She's very musical. What happened to me? [laughs] But she stood out. Not that she bragged, she was just naturally beautiful, so I was a nothing. But I had fun being the baby of the family. I had it good. I've really been lucky.

So it was just fun for you because being a kid-

Grace: Yeah, I was only about five or six in camp. I learned to play in the camp. I didn't know any better. And how old was your oldest sibling at the time?

Jack: Well Yuki was born in 1926. George was born around 1930, something like that. But then you have two families sort of like a second marriage. You're the product of the second marriage. Your mom and your dad had families of their own before. So all together you're about 13, 14 kids.

Grace: Oh, golly I'm the baby of the family.



Grace's father, Fusajiro Toya, in front of his home in West LA.

Didn't know any better.

Jack: But then you know, there's a theory of mine that they all had big families because they needed big families. And forget about education. Today all you do is push a button, just like a slot machine.

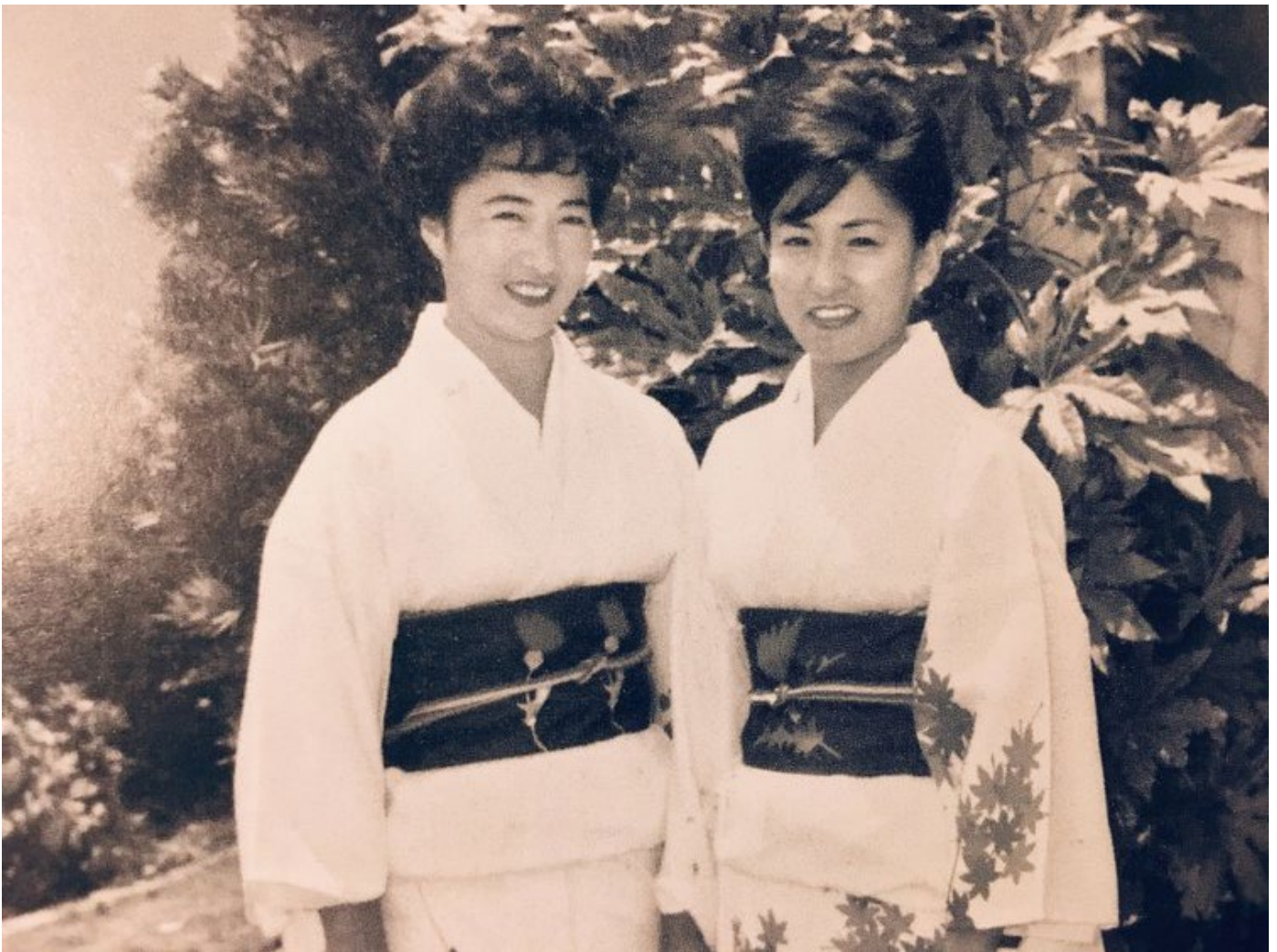
Grace: But you got to go to university earlier than other Japanese.

And where did you go to school?

UCLA. I got all my degrees there pretty much.

And what did you study?

Jack: I was going to go into engineering. I got accepted to Berkeley engineering school. Then I opted to go into the army instead. So I volunteered for the military and then I got caught in the Korean War. And then by the time I got out I figured engineering is not for me, I really need to get into management. Corporate management. My first job offer was ABCC. Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in Hiroshima. Right after the bomb hit, seven years later I graduated from UCLA in a Management Program and one of the first job offers was ABCC personnel director. And I went to her dad and said, 'I want to take your daughter to Hiroshima with me.' And he says no. Her sister had to get married first.



Grace Toya (right) and her sister Yuki (left) dressed in kimono for Obon.

Very traditional.

Jack: Yeah that's the Issei way of doing things. So I couldn't take her so I didn't take the job. But it would have been a completely different life if I went, took her. We'd be Japanese all the way through.

And so how did you two meet?

[Jack to Grace]: How did we meet?

Grace: You came to the market where I worked. Sawtelle Fish Market [laughs].

Jack: You were a little brat there. She was on Sawtelle. Her father was a manju maker and a tofu maker.

Grace: My brother filleted the fish. He was really good, talented. Beautiful work.

Jack: Then her sister did the cash register.

Grace: Oh boy, what'd I do?

Jack: And you took over. You couldn't even count change.

So your family owned this market, then.

Grace: Yeah right on Sawtelle, right in the middle.

Jack: But your mom liked me, that's why. But we really met at Bob Fujimoto's gas station right there. I was working there for Bob. He's not a relative or anything.



Bob's Shell Service was at the center of Japantown's Sawtelle.

And your families didn't know each other at all before?

Jack: No. [To Grace] I met you at the gas station. You drove in and you said, 'One gallon, one dollar,' or whatever.

So you were pumping gas?

Yeah, it was pumping gas.

Grace: Funny how we met, huh?

It's a great story because you know that that does not happen anymore. It's only relevant in this time period.

Jack: I worked five jobs. I couldn't take her to the Coconut Grove. Coconut Grove was the big place where all the actors and actresses were, and the Hollywood Derby or whatever it is.

The Brown Derby?

Brown Derby, yes, big deal. And she wanted to go and I didn't have any money. So I worked five jobs just to take her.

Grace: [laughs] Oh gee, how nice.

[To Grace] Where were your parents from, what prefectures?

Aichi-ken. Nagoya.

So they knew each other from Japan or no?

Jack: Father was here in San Francisco and he ran a hotel. And then her mother went back to Japan with all the kids and she came to San Francisco and that's where they met, she stayed at that hotel. But they moved to Salinas because she won a raffle. She won about \$3,000 and that was enough money to move a family so that he could start a business. And if he ran a hotel he couldn't make tofu, couldn't make manju.

Grace: He made the best tofu. We grew up on tofu.

Jack: He was very talented that way. But that was sad that Akira could never get out of his shell because the old man would always tell him, 'Do this, do that.'

Grace: My brother was handsome, very talented but he was bossed around, it was kind of sad.

What do you think he would have wanted to do?

Jack: He wanted to go to school. But that's not typical of Nisei because many of Nisei did their own thing. Like Bob Fujimoto. But your dad was hot-tempered. That's why Akira couldn't get out of his yoke.



If you're thinking about the legacy of camp and seeing the younger people trying to remember it, what do you hope that younger people are going to do with this history?

Grace's older brother, Akira.

The concentrated JA is now in Venice. Very strong JA. Because you know the ghetto, Sawtelle ghetto, eventually all the kids – after the Nisei, the Sansei, Yonsei – they all got a good education. Once they got a good education, they weren't going to stay in the ghetto. Venice got a very strong Japanese American identity. And then like our kids, they gravitated to Torrance. And they feel very comfortable in that environment.

How many children do you have?

Four.

Have you spoken to them about your history and what happened?

Jack: Yeah, I've shared it. It's nothing new for them, we've talked about it for many years. Our son is very active in the community. Very active in the JCI in Gardena, Japanese Cultural Institute. So now I'm asking him to see if he can figure out a way of getting a logo for Sawtelle Japantown. We need a logo. So he's working on that.

So if you talk about diversity on one hand and the strength of the community itself, the community is more and more dispersed. So Sawtelle itself is no longer a Japanese community. People come from all over to participate in Sawtelle activities, to hang out there. It's really the food, retail shops, the services are still there. [To Grace] I'm not going to take you to a \$150 omakase.

Grace: \$150! Really? Omakase? Give me the money, I'll buy my own.